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ABSTRACT

Resilience is a quality that characterizes children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school and life failures predicted for them. Recent research suggests ways that schools and communities can protect children from the threats that confront individuals and families. This digest interprets such findings for application in rural areas. The notion that schools and communities can nurture students' resilience and competence constitutes a radical shift away from the concept of "at risk" and its negative implications. Key protective factors found in families, schools, and communities include caring, supportive relationships; high expectations; and opportunities for social participation. Protective factors help develop resilient children who exhibit social competence, problem-solving skills, and a clear sense of personal autonomy and purpose. Because of their comparatively greater social capital, rural communities may have a head start on developing local efforts to nurture resilience. The development of such efforts includes several elements: (1) assessing local threats and setting priorities; (2) assessing and enhancing existing support systems; (3) promoting and celebrating mentoring relationships between children and adults; and (4) collaborating across agency and institutional boundaries. Resources on resilience, mentoring, and service learning, in the literature and on the Internet, are recommended. (Contains 15 references.) (SV)

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CULTIVATING RESILIENCE: AN OVERVIEW FOR RURAL EDUCATORS AND PARENTS

by Mary Finley

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Cultivating Resilience: An Overview for Rural Educators and Parents

by Mary Finley

ERIC DIGEST

The positive concepts of resilience and protection are less familiar to rural educators and to policymakers than the negative concept of risk (as in "at-risk students"). Perhaps this state of affairs is the result of an appropriate and longstanding research effort to understand the prevalent threats to children's well-being. But when it comes to actually helping children, educators need to understand more clearly what goes *right* even in risky circumstances, and why. Recent research suggests things schools and communities can do to protect children against the very real threats that confront families and individuals.

This Digest interprets these findings for application in rural communities. The purpose here includes helping educators and policymakers to regard students not as problems to be "fixed," but as personalities to be *protected*—and in which to nurture internal *resilience* to the prevalent threats. Such a shift in thinking constitutes a radically new way of looking at an old phenomenon. Garmezy (1991, p. 428) puts it this way: "To think of the appropriate role [for the school] is to think of oneself as a protective figure whose task is to do everything possible to enhance students' competence." Competence includes the capacity to deal with external threats, and all children need to develop such competence.

At risk vs. Resilient—A Difference in Outlook

"At risk," a term borrowed from the field of medicine, is used educationally in a wide variety of definitions—at risk of not graduating from high school, at risk of developing alcohol and other drug abuse problems, at risk of failure in life. Through overuse the term loses meaning. One can easily show, for instance, that all children (indeed, all people) are at risk. Life inevitably entails threats, after all, no matter how comfortable one's circumstances.

But many educators are understandably suspicious of the negative implications of identifying and labeling children as being at risk for such conditions as "failure in life." Fortunately, researchers began studying infants born to at-risk families years ago. They have discovered, in fact, that many infants born into risky circumstances actually become healthy adults (Garmezy, 1993: Rutter, 1987: Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). Some combination of circumstance and temperament helped these individuals to withstand the threats that life handed them.

Protective Factors

"Resiliency" is the construct used to describe the quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health problems, and juvenile delinquency predicted for them (Linquanti, 1992). The presence of protective factors in family, school, and community environments appears to alter or reverse predicted negative outcomes and foster the development, over time, of resiliency.

Key protective factors found in families, schools, and communities are identified by Benard (1991):

- a caring and supportive relationship with at least one person;
- consistently clear, high expectations communicated to the child; and
- ample opportunities to participate in and contribute meaningfully to one's social environment.

Protective factors help develop resilient children, who exhibit the following characteristics (Benard, 1991):

- social competence that allows the individual to sustain relationships;
- use of problem-solving skills in daily life; and
- a clear sense of personal autonomy, purpose, and future.

Garmezy (1991, p. 427) insists that the changed thinking of educators needs to include "the proud awareness" that their work in classrooms and schools is "the most worthy of societal enterprises—the enhancement of competence in their children and their tailoring, in part, of a protective shield to help children withstand the multiple vicissitudes that they can expect of a stressful world." But where and how do rural schools begin to tailor a "protective shield"?

Where Do We Begin?

Across the nation, rural communities and schools differ dramatically from one another. No single set of prescriptions could possibly cover rural communities of Mexican Americans, African Americans, American Indians, Alaska Natives, or Appalachians. Though the rural poverty rate is high and many areas suffer economically, writers have observed that *rural communities persist*. Rural communities can be much more cohesive than urban or suburban neighborhoods; for instance, strong kinship ties are common in rural communities.

Sociologist James Coleman (1988) refers to the personal relationships in a community—particularly those that span the generations—as "social capital." Social capital represents connections among people in a given place that allow them to care for one another—to look out for each other's well-being and for the well-being of one another's children. Rural areas can develop their comparatively greater social capital to help strengthen more children and families against factors that might put them at risk.

Although comparatively little R&D effort has focused on rural communities, Werner and Smith (1992) summa-

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rize several useful principles based on their 40-year longitudinal study of disadvantaged children and families in Hawaii. These principles are interpreted, next, in the light of rural circumstances.

Set priorities. When resources are limited (as they are in many rural communities), efforts should be guided by an assessment of priority, based on the most potentially damaging local threats. The question of priorities is very much a local one. Which local circumstances pose the greatest threats and to whom? The diversity of rural communities means that priorities will vary.

Assess available capacity. As part of a community effort, schools need to be aware of—and use—existing services. The key idea to remember is that resiliency is best nurtured and ensured community-wide. A student who accesses protective factors anywhere in the community benefits the whole community—and, in fact, contributes to an increase in the community's social capital (Linquanti, 1992). Schools' efforts, in both formal and informal activities, must therefore protect existing support systems. In fact, they should be designed to enhance existing support systems.

Support and celebrate. Resiliency can be cultivated, according to the research, through a child's solid, meaningful connection with just one very caring individual (Benard, 1991). A child may connect with the right important individual in school, at church, at a youth or family center, at 4-H activities, or at a local clinic or agency. These people—in whatever capacity the child relates to them—become mentors (Cecil & Roberts, 1992; Flaxman, 1992). They give the community's children a secure basis for the development of trust, autonomy, and initiative; and the community should support their efforts prominently. Some staff training may be necessary for mentors, but genuine celebrations of the relationships between mentors and their protegés are also important.

Tear down turf boundaries. Obviously, jealously guarded institutional boundaries are not consistent with the theory and practice of cultivating resilience. Here is where rural communities have another advantage. Interdisciplinary arrangements between schools and social services first became operational in rural areas, where scarcity of resources necessitated collaboration. The trend to work with other agencies continues to grow, as reflected in the literature (see Lutfiyya, 1993, ERIC/CRESS Digest EDO-RC-92-9).

Resources

Research on specifically rural interventions is scanty. The reference list below includes available resources that rural school leaders can review for ideas that have at least worked in urban settings. Benard (1991) and Linquanti (1992) provide particularly thorough introductions to the resiliency paradigm, both with extensive bibliographies. Crockett and Smink's (1991) guidebook on *mentoring* is excellent. Though few models for instituting a resiliency paradigm exist, Winfield's (1991) *framework for planning* school and community interventions can be adapted for any size school district. At the *classroom level*, Hodges (1993) and Cecil and Roberts (1992) provide good starting places for teachers.

A growing literature on service learning, which includes community-wide efforts and mentorships of the sort considered above, is also relevant when thinking about resilience, protection, and social capital. The aims of service learning relate very clearly to the protective factors described in this Digest. A three-volume resource series titled *Combining Service and Learning* (Kendall & Luce, 1990) features an extensive annotated bibliography, descriptions of many programs, consideration of implementation issues and dilemmas, and original articles on a variety of topics related to the policy and practice of service learning.

You can also contact the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at 1/800-808-SERVE, via the Internet at serve@maroon.tc.umn.edu, and via their gopher server address, gopher.nicsl.coled.umn.edu (note that "gopher" is part of the address) for resources and "nuts and bolts" contact information about service learning efforts (contacts for hundreds of service learning programs are available).

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